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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000066

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL;

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01-10-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Journey of a human rights activist: From a focus on the government to deep concern about the LTTE

Refs: 02 Colombo 2133, and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, DCM. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Father Harry Miller (AMCIT -- strictly protect), a Catholic priest and resident of Sri Lanka for almost 55 years, is changing his tune on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. Prior to the start of the peace process in December 2001, Miller was for many years harshly critical of the GSL's human rights record. More recently, however, Miller has become worried about the Tamil Tigers and its nefarious activities, including the forcible recruitment of children. Miller's shift in emphasis places a spotlight on a larger trend we are seeing among human rights activists -- and many Tamils, who are increasingly worried about the LTTE. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) ABOUT THE FATHER: Father Harry Miller, 77, is a Catholic priest who has lived in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka, since leaving his Jesuit seminary in New Orleans in 1948, the year of Sri Lanka's independence. For years, Miller served as a teacher and administrator at St. Michael's School in Batticaloa town, a prestigious local elementary-to-high school. In addition, he managed a coconut farm located just outside Batticaloa town, which is part of the Jesuit Mission to Sri Lanka and helps support Roman Catholic academic programs.

3. (C) Through the years as ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka flared into confrontation and violence, Miller became increasingly involved in human rights issues. In 1983, he helped form the Batticaloa Peace Committee, a local human rights organization. More recently, Miller became a local representative for the Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which is charged with monitoring adherence to the February 2001 ceasefire accord between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Due to his length of service in Batticaloa and the multiple organizations he remains involved in, Miller is a well-regarded local fixture in the east, and a consistently well-informed interlocutor for diplomats and the international press. (Note: Aside from his comments re human rights and local politics, he will also tell you entertaining family stories about the "Yankee" troops entering Louisiana in the Civil War.)

4. (C) A LONG-TIME CRITIC OF THE GSL: For years after Sri Lanka's conflict began in 1983, Miller was extremely critical of the government and its security forces. (Note: Miller was also highly critical of the Indian Peace-keeping Force, "IPKF," which was deployed in Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. His opinions on IPKF-LTTE fighting and the human rights fallout are widely quoted in a well-known book on Sri Lanka called "Only Man is Vile" by William McGowan.) On countless occasions through the years, he accused the security forces of involvement in human rights violations in the war against the LTTE. In doing this, he has often publicly contradicted the military's official statements about incidents in the east. An example of this was his description of the May 17, 2000, "Vesak Day" (a Buddhist holiday) bombing in Batticaloa that killed 18 people, including 9 children. The military investigation into the incident found that all of the deaths were due to the initial bomb blast, which was almost certainly set by the LTTE. Miller maintained, however, that the children, and some of the adults, were killed when security forces arrived and indiscriminately opened fire.

5. (C) In criticizing the government, Miller often made clear his view that the way the GSL was fighting the war, which included overlooking human rights violations by its troops, was helping provoke Tamils to join the LTTE. That said, he was never an apologist for the LTTE, and its use of violence and terrorism. In myriad

conversations with emboffs, once he had finished criticizing the security forces, Miller would lambaste the LTTE. At the same time, the overall trend of Miller's comments -- and the lack of balance in the passion with which those views were delivered -- almost seemed to gloss over LTTE actions in favor of hitting out at the government.

16. (C) A SHIFT: With the advent of the peace process in December 2001, Miller's steady diet of criticism for the government has dramatically morphed into a focus on the poor human rights record of the LTTE. Per Reftels, in a recent meeting with emboffs, Miller slammed the LTTE for forcibly abducting children for its armed forces and for placing burdensome taxes on civilians. (Note: On the topic of forcible recruitment of children, Miller was recently quoted in The New York Times as stating that the LTTE "have thousands of children, and they're still taking them. We haven't gotten any back.") He went on to specifically complain about an incident in late 2002 in which LTTE cadre forced St. Michaels' schoolchildren to work on one of the group's farms, noting that one of the children died in a fall from a tractor. He also complained that the LTTE was seizing houses in the Batticaloa area for use by its cadre, and that members of the group were stealing coconuts from the farm he manages and using the tractor there without permission. He has also asserted that the Batticaloa Peace Committee cannot do its work because of a complete lack of cooperation from the LTTE.

17. (C) Although Miller has not said it explicitly, his deeper concern seems to be that the LTTE is now running amok in the east and little is being done to stop it. At times, he even expresses concerns that the security forces he once loathed seem to have thrown in the towel by retreating into their garrisons. While he does not say it, perhaps because it is too sharp a departure from his previous years of hitting out at the GSL, Miller seems a man worried that the government in Colombo plans to give up the east, leaving the LTTE in unfettered charge.

18. (C) COMMENT: Miller's dramatic shift in perspective places a spotlight on a larger trend we are seeing among human rights activists -- and many Tamils. While Sri Lanka's security forces have a well-documented history of human rights violations, it is the case that this record gradually improved (largely thanks to international pressure) as the government and judiciary increased oversight, and the military provided better training.

19. (C) With the focus on the government diminishing, the LTTE is being recognized as the major human rights violator in the country. More generally, human rights activists and many Tamils are newly aware that the north and the east may well have to live with the LTTE being the major political force in those areas for some time to come. This recognition is not a positive one, creating a classic "be careful what you wish for because it might come true" situation. In essence, Miller and those like him got what they want in that the government has improved its record but, in the process, they are now stuck with the LTTE, which is much, much less amenable to change. END COMMENT.

10. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS